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COVER ART

Valerie Estella shows off an acrobatic move on her skateboard at the American Memorial Park in Garapan.

Photo by
BEA CABRERA

On to the next decade!

We just finished celebrating a fleeting milestone for TAGA *Plus* that was remarkable only to us—the 10th anniversary of the magazine. We started out with the October-November issue of TAGA *Sports* in 2010—an exclusively sports-oriented magazine for the CNMI—and, in less than a decade, that magazine has now evolved into its current iteration as TAGA *Plus*, a hybrid that features not just sports stories but also a medley of stories on business, personal finance, lifestyle, home, humor, décor, art, humanities, etc. From just being a gleam in the eyes of associate editor Mark Rabago and then-sportswriter Shan Seman, to a full-blown magazine that has managed to sustain itself for a decade, TAGA *Sports* has managed to beat the odds of finding worthwhile stories even in a relatively parched sports landscape of the CNMI (admit it, nothing much is happening in the sports world of the CNMI compared to bigger jurisdictions!) and all of us are excited as it now expands its forays into other areas of Commonwealth life as TAGA *Plus*.

The magazine enters its new decade faced with the colossal challenge created by the COVID-19 pandemic. From the zero tourists entering the market and a tattered economy that limped its way to 2021, to companies fleeing traditional forms of advertising and bringing their business to social media and other online platforms, all traditional mass media, including print (newspapers and magazines), are being forced to adapt and change our business models. Thankfully, people still want to know what's going on around them. Our challenge, then, is to find new ways of bringing those stories to our readers and the greater community. We must adapt to this "new normal." The law of natural selection still applies, so change we must, as Yoda would say. Be on the lookout for those changes in the years ahead!

Also, be sure to check out in this edition a story of our newest contributor, Lindsay Nash. She pens a series for *Saipan Tribune* that mostly focuses on CNMI personalities. For this issue of the magazine, she turns her attention to cultural torchbearers—people in the community whose idea of "culture" is not one limited to dour ivory towers but one that lives and breathes and gives value, beauty, and meaning to everyday CNMI life.

We hope you enjoy reading this issue of TAGA *Plus* as much as we enjoyed putting it together. For suggestions, reactions, comments, or criticisms, just shoot us an email at editor@saipantribune.com.

Sinseramente,

Jayvee Vallejera
Editor

TAGA plus

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KIMBERLY BAUTISTA**ESMORES**

Kimberly, who recently got married and now goes by the name of Kimberly Bautista Esmores, is *Saipan Tribune*'s crime and court reporter. She loves reporting on the most recent scandals—the bigger and more salacious the better. For this issue, though, she tells tales of her own challenges, not just as a new housewife but as a new clueless housewife.

BEA**CABRERA**

Bea Cabrera is correspondent for TAGA *Plus* and likes to understand people in her stories by trying to experience what they go through. For this edition, she tried a skateboard to see what the skate girls are talking about. The skateboard didn't take her far but she understood the freedom that came with moving using your own power and the wind whipping through your body. Both amazing stuff! Email Bea at beecabbie@gmail.com.

IVA**MAURIN**

Iva started her love affair with birds as a child after a night of helping a rain-drenched sparrow get dry and giving it her pillow for sleeping. Now, while far from being a "birder," and despite her far-from-perfect eyesight, she goes birdwatching almost every weekend with her husband, Larry. She's a nature lover and writes environment stories for *Saipan Tribune*, so drop her an email at iva_maurin@saipantribune.com if you have a story.

JASON B.**MIYASHITA**

Jason is the managing director of Raymond James & Associates in Guam where he is also senior institutional consultant and senior vice president, Investments. Miyashita has more than 15 years of experience in the financial services industry and was born and raised in Guam. Contact him at jason.b.miyashita@raymondjames.com.

ROSELYN**MONROYO**

Roselyn came to Saipan in 2005—the same year the Northern Mariana Islands Football Association was founded and when motocross racing was still being held at the CowTown Raceway in Marpi. She loves the close games at the pitch and the high-flying action at CowTown, but not the times (often) she tripped because of the potholes and went home covered with dirt from the raceway.

LINDSAY**NASH**

Lindsay is a writer and photographer on Saipan who wishes she could paint, carve, or draw. Her Instagram feed is full of Saipan artists, so when an opportunity presented itself to get to know these local artisans better, she jumped at it. For now, she'll settle with storytelling so you can hear about these amazing artists, too. Email her at lindsayinsaipan@gmail.com.

JUSTINE**NAUTA**

Justine, who is pursuing double major in Liberal Arts with Emphasis on Social Work and Bachelor of Science in Rehabilitation and Human Services at the Northern Marianas College, is *Saipan Tribune*'s newest reporter. She took a leap of faith when the job presented itself and that leap of faith has shown her a different career path, and a spark for writing. Contact Justine at jnauta14@gmail.com.

MARK**RABAGO**

Mark, who is the associate editor of TAGA *Plus* and *Saipan Tribune*, has tried the whole gamut of massage establishments on Saipan—from $10 massages in a makeshift massage parlor in San Antonio to $35 one-and-half-hour relaxing ones. He's glad that COVID-19 only momentarily shuttered this guilty pleasure of his.

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DIABETES QUICK FIX:
Vegetable lasagna

LINDAGASSENHEIMER
Tribune News Service

Lasagna—a comforting favorite! This vegetarian one will become one of your favorites, too. It can be made ahead and rewarmed. This recipe is for two and is made in a loaf pan rather than a large lasagna dish.

It takes only a few minutes to prepare the lasagna, and the remaining time is in the oven.

Helpful Hints:

- An 8 1/2-inch by 4 1/2-inch size loaf pan is used in this recipe. Il using a larger loaf pan, make fewer pasta layers to fill the pan.
- Break up lasagna noodles to fit the pan.

Countdown:

- Preheat oven to 375 degrees.
- Prepare ingredients.
- Fill loaf pan and bake.

Shopping List:

To buy: 1 box lasagna noodles, 1 bottle low-sodium, no-sugar-added pasta sauce*, 1 package chopped frozen spinach, 1 container nonfat ricotta cheese, 1 bottle ground nutmeg, 1 package shredded, reduced-fat, sharp cheddar cheese, 1/4 pound sliced mushrooms and 1 bunch fresh basil.
Staples: olive oil, olive oil spray, garlic, eggs salt and black peppercorns.

Recipe:

- 1/2 cup low-sodium, no-sugar-added pasta sauce*
- 1/2 cup water
- 2 crushed garlic cloves
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 1 cup defrosted, chopped frozen spinach, well drained
- 1/2 cup non-fat ricotta cheese
- 1/4 teaspoon ground nutmeg
- 1/4 pound sliced mushrooms (about 1 1/2 cups)
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 1 egg
- 1 egg white
- 1/4 pound lasagna noodles (about 5 10-inch sheets)
- Olive oil spray
- 1/2 cup fresh basil, torn into small pieces
- 1 cup shredded, reduced-fat, sharp cheddar cheese

Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Mix pasta sauce, water, garlic and olive oil together. Place defrosted spinach in a sieve or colander and press with a large spoon to squeeze out as much liquid as possible. Add spinach to a bowl with the ricotta cheese and mix well. Add the nutmeg and mix again. Add the mushrooms and salt and pepper to taste. Mix in the egg and egg white.

Spray the bottom and sides of the loaf pan with olive oil spray and spoon 1/4 of the pasta sauce into the pan. Place a layer of lasagna noodles over the sauce, breaking them to fit in one layer. Spoon half the spinach mixture over the noodles. Place another layer of noodles over the spinach. Spoon the remaining spinach mixture over that layer of noodles. Place a final layer of lasagna noodles over the spinach. Pour the remaining pasta sauce over the noodles. Arrange the basil leaves over the sauce and sprinkle the cheese evenly over the top. Cover the pan tightly with foil and place on a baking tray. Bake 40 minutes.

Remove from the oven and let sit 15 minutes. Run a knife around the sides of the pan to loosen the lasagna. Cut the lasagna in half horizontally and remove one half at a time with a large spatula. Place each half no a dinner plate and serve.

Yield 2 servings.

Per serving: 485 calories, 124 calories from fat, 13.7 g fat, 3.3 g saturated fat, 6.8 g monounsaturated fat, 100 mg cholesterol, 30 g protein, 59.1 g carbohydrates, 5.9 g dietary fiber, 9.2 g sugars, 458 mg sodium, 964 mg potassium, 519 mg phosphorus

Exchanges: 3 starch, 3 vegetable, 3 lean protein, 1 fat

*reduced-sodium, no-sugar-added pasta sauce, containing per cup: 131 calories, 3.8 g fat, 0.4 g saturated fat, 77 mg sodium

From Delicious One-Pot Dishes by Linda Gassenheimer, published by the American Diabetes Association. Reprinted with permission from The American Diabetes Association. To order this book call 1-800-232-6733 or order online at www.shopdiabetes.org.

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TAGA *Plus* Contributing Writer

Investing through mutual funds and ETFs

You can invest in all three major asset classes through mutual funds, which pool your money with that of other investors. Each fund's manager selects specific securities to buy based on a stated investment strategy.

Mutual funds offer two key benefits. Because most mutual funds own dozens or hundreds of securities, you achieve greater diversification than buying a few individual securities on your own. Also, the fund manager's expertise is part of what you pay for in buying mutual fund shares.

A mutual fund may invest in one of the three major asset classes, or combine them. For example, a balanced fund typically includes stocks and bonds. With an actively managed mutual fund, the fund manager buys and sells specific securities, trying to beat a benchmark index such as the S&P 500. A passively managed or index fund tries to match the return of a specific index by holding only the securities included in that index.

Note: Before investing in a mutual fund or ETF, carefully consider its investment objectives, risks, fees and expenses, which can be found in the prospectus available from the fund. Read it carefully before investing.

Like index funds, exchange traded funds, or ETFs, typically invest in a group of securities represented in a specific index, and the way they're organized means that expenses typically are lower than those of actively managed mutual funds. But you must pay a brokerage commission whenever you buy or sell ETFs, so your overall costs could be higher, especially if you trade frequently.

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11 financial New Year's resolutions and how to fulfill them

LIZHUND
Bankrate.com

It's time to think about resolutions for the new year. After a year like 2020, financial resolutions are probably top of mind.

The beginning of the year is the prime time to focus on what's going on with your money. With the right plan in place, you can stick to your financial resolutions and end the coming year in a better place than you started it.

To help you get started, here are 11 financial resolutions to set, along with expert tips on how to keep them.

1 Refinance your mortgage and/or your student loans

While the coronavirus pandemic has wreaked havoc on many parts of life this past year, it has also provided some opportunities. For example, you can now secure record low mortgage rates, making this a prime time to refinance and lower your monthly payments.

As for student loan refinancing, federal student loans are in forbearance until Jan. 31, meaning interest is suspended and payments are not required. However, this does not apply to private student loans and you may want to consider refinancing these types of loans to lock in lower rates.

2 Pay down credit card debt

Consumer credit card debt dropped in 2020 for the first time in eight years.

This data came as a bit of a surprise considering the pandemic-created recession, but it's a hopeful sign that consumers are getting their debt under control.

If you have credit card debt, consider making it a goal to pay it off. There are a few approaches you can take, but two common strategies are:

- Paying off your highest debt first (the debt avalanche method)
- Paying off your smallest amount of debt first (the debt snowball method).

If you're struggling with payments, consider credit counseling, a low-interest balance transfer, a personal loan or even debt settlement.

3 Can't stick to a budget? Create a spending plan instead

If you've had trouble sticking to your budget in the past, consider ditching the traditional budgeting method and create a spending plan instead, says Loreen Gilbert, an experienced wealth manager and president at WealthWise Financial Services.

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"The concept of living on a spending plan instead of a budget can give you freedom and peace of mind," Gilbert says.

A spending plan allows you to choose what you spend your money on instead of restricting yourself on what you can't spend. Start by determining your monthly fixed income and then decide what spending categories are most important to you.

As a general rule of thumb, you should start with a necessity bucket, which likely includes semi-fixed expenses such as rent, utilities, groceries and funding your savings accounts. After you've identified how much will need to for those expenses, you can create other spending buckets, such as a fun bucket, that the remaining funds can go toward.

Money management apps like Mint are a good tool for keeping track of where your money is going. You can also find these tools on some banking apps as well.

The end result is the same as budgeting, minus the restrictive rules—making it a good strategy for those who don't like being told what they cannot do.

4 Automate your savings

One of the easiest ways to build your savings is automating your contributions.

When you automate your savings, you won't have to think about how much money you want to set aside each month or be tempted to put less into savings.

Most employers allow you to divide your paycheck so that different amounts go into different accounts. If not, you can likely set up automatic transfers with your bank. Regardless of which option you choose, make it a priority to have your savings automated.

5 Start an emergency fund

A Bankrate survey from June found that not having enough emergency savings was Americans' top financial regret since the coronavirus began. Bottom line: Don't overlook your emergency fund.

The new year is as good a time as any to start (or grow) your emergency fund. In general, experts recommend saving three to six months of living expenses. Start by opening a separate and dedicated high-yield savings account. After that, consider these four tips:

- Evaluate your spending and look for areas where you can save.
- Set a savings goal.
- Set up automatic contributions.
- Try to increase your contributions over time.

6 Boost your retirement savings

Saving for retirement is one of the most important aspects of a sound financial plan.

"Use 2021 to boost or maximize contributions to 401(k)s or HSAs, plot out holistic retirement goals (e.g., Where will I live? Will I work? How much to budget for travel?) and, no matter your age or life stage, take meaningful steps to boost your financial wellness," says Lorna Sabbia, head of retirement and personal wealth solutions at Bank of America.

There are a few ways you can boost your retirement savings. For one, if your employer offers a 401(k) match, be sure you're contributing enough to get the full match since it's essentially free money. Another thing to consider is looking at where your money is being invested. Many experts recommend investing in a diverse portfolio of assets to reduce your risk but still achieve attractive returns.

Finally, it's important to remember that the only way you get the market's long-term average return of 10 percent is by holding through all the tough times.

"Your retirement savings will grow quicker if you pick a solid long-term plan and then stick with it through the good and bad times, but especially the bad times," says James Royal, Bankrate investment and wealth management reporter.

Royal says that investors should continue adding to the account and keep from selling, no matter how tempting it may be.

7 Invest more

Don't limit your investing to only making tax-advantaged retirement contributions.

If you already have an emergency savings account, you might consider setting up an investment account to invest for goals with specific time horizons, like early retirement or saving for a house.

"While it's great to max out your tax-advantaged retirement accounts—$6,000 in an IRA and up to $19,500 in a 401(k)—you're going to have even more opportunities if you save in a taxable account as well," Royal says.

Royal adds that some of the biggest perks of investing outside of your retirement account include:

- No limit to what you can save.
- Tax deferral benefits on unrealized gains (stocks you don't sell).
- Immediate access to the cash without penalties or other restrictions.

If you're just getting started, you may want to consider looking into a robo-adviser, which will do the investing for you after taking your risk tolerance and ideal earnings into consideration.

8 Improve your credit score

A good credit score varies depending on the scoring system. For example, FICO considers a good score to be between 670 and 739, while the VantageScore scale considers 661 through 781 to be good.

Either way, your credit score plays a critical role in determining whether you get access to financing and other financial services you need. Your credit score can influence your car insurance rates in some states, as well as how much you pay in interest when you get a loan.

Visit AnnualCreditReport.com to get a free copy of your credit report and score. You're typically only able to access one free report a year, but it's since been increased to once a month until April 2021 as a result of COVID-19.

To increase your credit score, consider these 4 tips:

- Pay all bills on time and in full.
- Lower your credit utilization ratio.
- Take advantage of score-boosting programs, like ExperianBoost.
- Don't apply for new accounts too often.

9 Cook more meals at home

This may be something you've already begun to do with many restaurants around the U.S. being limited to takeout only. Keep it going into 2021.

You can keep it fun (and easy) with meal subscription services, like Blue Apron, which gives you the option of picking new recipes each week along with delivering perfectly measured ingredients straight to your door.

On the other hand, if you've turned to takeout as your go-to during this time then consider giving cooking a try and see how much you save. After giving it a go, calculate your savings and Consider putting those savings toward paying down debt or building up your emergency fund.

10 Update your beneficiaries

Have you experienced a life-changing situation recently? If so, your beneficiaries might be out of date.

"If you haven't looked at it in a while or especially if there has been a change in family dynamics such as a marriage or divorce, review the beneficiary designation on your life insurance and retirement accounts to make sure it reflects your current intentions," says Bankrate Chief Financial Analyst, Greg McBride, CFA.

This includes checking your retirement and bank accounts, insurance policy and other financial accounts to make sure your beneficiaries are up to date.

Adding a beneficiary to your accounts is critical to ensure your assets will go to the person you intended them to. Additionally, it's important to note that beneficiaries trump wills, so make sure the two documents are aligned in their directives.

11 Look for ways to boost your income

Sometimes, it's less about savings and cutting back and more about increasing your income.

"If 2020 has taught us anything, it's that life is uncertain and having multiple income streams is more important than ever," says Laura Gariepy, business coach and founder of Before You Go Freelance, a blog that offers advice for aspiring freelancers. "People are realizing that self-employment is not inherently more risky than traditional employment because there's built-in income diversification when you have multiple clients or customers."

There's a variety of ways you can increase your revenue streams. Freelance work, for example, is great for those who have a specific skill to offer others. But there are also less technical side hustles, like dog walking, to consider. Additionally, if you have a bit more money to front, then you could consider investing in rental properties.

The bottom line is there's plenty of ways to passively increase your income, it's just a matter of finding what works for you and your situation.

By finding different ways to increase your revenue streams, you aren't entirely dependent on one income source. Not only can that strategy help you make more money, increase your savings and reach your goals, it can also provide some protection if you lose your primary job. (Visit Bankrate online at bankrate.com.)

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CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

SAVING THE ÅGA

The quest to bring back the endangered Mariana crow

IVA MAURIN
iva_maurin@saipantribune.com
TAGA *Plus* Contributing Writer

"It feels like a privilege. It feels like an adventure. We're looking for answers to questions that nobody has answers to."

It was a chance meeting exactly a year ago, at the Bird Sanctuary on Rota, that I met Henry Fandel who, along with other researchers, has been working with the community of Rota to bring back the population of the endangered åga, the indigenous term for the Mariana crow.

A few hours after that initial meeting, we arranged to meet again for a quick interview on the efforts to save the åga. Twelve months later, we found ourselves talking about the birds again, this time to know what has happened to those that have been released back to the wild last year.

Fandel is one of the crew leaders of the Mariana Crow Recovery Project, a research program administered by Dr. Renee Ha and Dr. Sarah Faegre from the University of Washington, which has been monitoring the åga since 2005, understanding the factors that contributed to its decline and attempting to increasing its population.

The åga is a handsome and extremely intelligent bird, adapted to the limestone forests of Rota and Guam, and nests exclusively in native trees such as *fagot, åhgao, nunu,* and *ifit*.

"For ages, humans have had varied and complex relationships with crows and ravens across the world for varying cultural reasons, and they have recently become well-known academically for their exceptional intelligence, their transmission of culture, their use of self-fashioned tools, and their ability to think consciously," Fandel said.

Unfortunately, due to the introduction of brown tree snakes in Guam from the Manus Islands in the 1950s, that island's native bird population, which included the åga, got decimated. Fandel said it is possible that the widespread use of pesticides, particularly by the U.S. military, also contributed to the decline of the avian populations in Guam.

The åga can now be found only on Rota, making the work for its survival extremely important.

ON THE NET

https://www.facebook.com/MarianaCrowRecoveryProject/

The remaining åga

According to Fandel, there are now just only about 200 åga on Rota, which is roughly 15% of the 1,300 bird population estimated during the mid-'80s. "The brown tree snake hasn't been able to establish a population here on Rota. For reasons that remain poorly understood, the population of åga on Rota began crashing in the '80s despite the absence of the brown tree snake."

The Mariana Crow Recovery Project's job is to monitor this remaining bird population, and to try to solve the mystery of their decline. "There are lots of theories out there that explain the åga's decline, but we want to find evidence supporting one of those theories. We're collecting evidence so we can empower ourselves to address the most pressing issues, not just any issue suspected to be at play."

Evidence point to åga having been on Rota for more than two million years and, Fandel adds, its presence in the island's ecosystem is of primary importance to the many people of Rota who depend on it for food, medicine, leisure, and cultural identity, among other things.

Everything is interconnected, and every single species play a role in maintaining the balance in the ecosystem. This means losing the åga could equate to losing services such as primary production, seed dispersal, pollination, nutrient cycling, climate regulation, disease or pest mitigation, and many others.

"Maintaining biodiversity and recovering endangered populations that are longtime members of Rota's ecological community gives the local ecosystem it's best chance at stability. This is good for the ecosystem itself but, more importantly, it's good for the people who depend on it."

Hope for the åga

For years now, researchers of the Mariana Crow Recovery Project have been doing islandwide surveys to re-estimate the åga's total population size, assessing factors contributing to mortality of first-year crows and adult released crows through a radio telemetry study, and have been working with their partners at the San Diego Zoo in a rear-and-release program.

Twenty-three birds have been released to the wild since October 2018, 21 of which were captive-reared and two, young wild-reared birds taken into captivity for rehabilitation. Twenty of these birds are still alive, and 18 are thriving in the wild without any supplemental food.

Overall, the survival of 20 out of 23 birds is encouraging, Fandel said, especially given that even young åga that are parent-reared in the wild face a mortality rate of about 30%.

"The captive-reared birds have proven that they are able to survive and forage successfully on their own. But what's even more encouraging than the survivorship of release birds is the fact that six of them have made breeding attempts in the wild," he said.

They have identified five unique breeding pairs that included captive-reared release birds, four of which were release birds paired with one another, and one of which included a wild bird. And while none of them have produced a young so far, a few of them have made it to the incubation phase.

"We're encouraged that the rear-and-release program is producing birds that will attempt to breed, and look forward to being able to report wild young reared by captive-reared birds. That will be the most important milestone to reach—knowing we are producing functional members of the population."

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Kekoa Kani handles a fledgling åga for another team member while taking field measurements and giving the young crow individually recognizable color bands.

Evidence point to the åga having been on Rota for more than two million years, yet there are now only about 200 åga on the island.

With the åga's population so small at just about 200, the 20 additional birds equate to a significant 10% boost. What's even better, the researchers are planning to release more into the wild this spring. "There are 13 additional release birds pegged to be released around March 2021. They were going to be released this December, but many of them have not yet begun their molt. It's best to release them after they have molted their juvenile plumage so they have high quality feathers when they are learning to forage in the wild on their own," Fandel said. "We want to give them the best chances of success as they transition to independence in the wild."

Together for the åga

The work truly does not stop.

The Mariana Crow Recovery Project team is currently collecting between eight and 10 eggs or nestlings from wild nests, with five young hatchlings now under the care of San Diego Zoo staff, which will be part of the 2021/2022 release.

When asked how it feels like to be a part of the project, Fandel said, "It feels like a privilege. It feels like an adventure. We're looking for answers to questions that nobody has answers to."

This significant work to bring back the åga is made real through a partnership between the entire Mariana Crow Recovery Project team, with the San Diego Zoo, and the community of Rota.

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Dylan Hubl and Henry Fandel pose briefly after banding an adult åga. This particular bird, known to åga researchers as Aluminum-Orange-Orange or "a-oo" for the colored bands she wears on her legs, is considered unique within the population for her relatively straight and stubby bill.

"Beyond working directly for our project, members of the community can be instrumental to åga research by granting our team permission to pass through their private land in order to reach the remote forests within which the åga is usually found," Fandel said. "Many, many landowners on Rota have already given us permission to pass through their land, and it has been an enormous help. It would be impossible to do our work without the community's support."

It all makes sense that so much work is being done to help bring back the åga, for indeed, the åga is Rota's crow—the Marianas crow. In the Marianas, family is first, and it is but right to make sure that every member of the Marianas family is protected, saved, and loved.

To get updates on the Åga Project, visit the Mariana Crow Recovery Project page on Facebook (https://www.facebook.com/MarianaCrowRecoveryProject/).

SAFE RIDING IN THE WORLD OF MOTOCROSS RACING

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Helmet? Check.
Goggles? Check
Chest protector? Check
On weekends, while other moms carry grocery lists on their way to the store, Vanessa Camacho heads to the racetrack in Marpi with a different list—protective gear/equipment for her two daughters, Harley and Brooklyn Susulin.

The Susulin siblings are among the many riders joining Marianas Racing Association's regular races at either the Kan Pacific grounds or former CowTown Raceway. And while Brooklyn, Harley, and other young riders are as brave and confident as seasoned veterans on the track as they zoom their way past track obstacles, MRA still requires them to practice safety first, hence the protective gear plus the "do's and don't's" of motocross riding.

Here are some of the important safety precautions for dirt bikes/ATV riders, as suggested by MRA vice president Cuki Alvarez.

TEDDY CORPUZ

MUST DO

1 **Always ride at a designated track.** Whenever you plan on riding and practicing, always be sure to ride your dirt bike at a designated place such as the Kan Pacific track or at the CowTown raceway. These places are recognized as designated areas to do motocross activities. Rules and regulations are posted in these areas so, needless to say, follow all safety guidelines.

2 **Always ride and practice with a buddy or partner whenever possible.** If you plan on going riding, it is always a good idea to do so with the "buddy system." Riding with a buddy or partner or just having someone there is a good insurance policy in case you get hurt. They can always assist you or call 911 if you are seriously hurt from a crash or a fall.

3 **Wear the proper safety gear before racing or practicing on the track.** Always use the proper riding safety gear before getting on your motorcycle, most importantly your helmet! I can't stress enough the importance of wearing the proper safety gear.

4 **Ride within your ability and always practice safely as much as possible.** I always teach and encourage new, beginner, and novice riders to always "ride within their abilities and limits." Motocross is a potentially dangerous sport; however a lot of accidents can be minimized and prevented by just not riding over your head and respecting the obstacles that are on the track.

5 **When at the track, always ride in the same direction.** A track can be ridden in either direction—forward or reverse—but never both at the same time. While you are at the track, and before getting on the track, observe the direction of the flow and follow accordingly.

MUST-HAVES FOR MRA RIDERS

JOSEPH CHIN

JOSEPH CHIN

JOSEPH CHIN

MUST NOT

1 **DON'T RIDE UNDER THE INFLUENCE.** This rule is self-explanatory. You should never ride your motorcycle (or any vehicle) if you have been drinking or have taken any drugs or medication that can hinder your ability to control the bike.

2 **DON'T RIDE WITHOUT THE PROPER SAFETY RIDING GEAR.** This rule is crystal clear and you should always protect yourself to the fullest extent. Remember, motorcycles are high performance racing machines with lots of horsepower and using the proper gear will help prevent serious injuries. Invest in the proper gear! Your health and livelihood are most certainly worth it.

3 **DON'T RIDE RECKLESSLY OR CUT THE TRACK OR SPEED IN ANY OTHER AREA BESIDES THE TRACK.** Stay on course and always practice safety. When exiting the track, proceed to your parking area or pits at a safe speed and be aware of pedestrians and spectators.

4 **DON'T NEGLECT YOUR BIKE!** Always maintain and service your bike before riding or especially before racing it. Make sure there are no loose or broken parts. Make sure all your components are in the proper working order at all times; brakes, chain, suspension, handlebars, engine etc. Riding with a broken bike leads to accidents. Always take good care of your motorcycle.

5 **DON'T RIDE YOUR DIRT BIKE ON PUBLIC ROADS, PARKS, AND MONUMENTS.** Although there are many nice trails on the island to go trail riding in and other beautiful sites to visit, do not ride your off-road dirt bike on public roads, private property, and national parks and monuments. Motocross is not a crime, so please don't make it one. Follow all rules and regulations and safety guidelines and let's all enjoy motocross riding in the CNMI.

A cultural renaissance on Saipan

Local arts blend ancient traditions with modern artforms

LINDSAY NASH

Leon carved this piece for Mother's Day this year which serves as an interpretation of his mother. It features 12 holes, one for each of her children, and is in the shape of an adze, an ancient tool that was used to shape ancient canoes and homes. "My belief is my mother shaped each of us into who we are. She was the master carver of my family."

LINDSAY**NASH**
TAGA *Plus* Contributing Writer

Art is everywhere on Saipan.

Cruise down the main roads and you'll see the concrete utility poles now covered with island-themed artwork from Project Haligi. In other spots across the island, you can see local artist Meena Benavente's tin artwork hammered to broken fences or headless palm trees—still inspiring hope two years after the tragedy of Super Typhoon Yutu.

These days, the art community is burgeoning. A new generation of artists has emerged to share the stories and traditions of the islands. The artists are as diverse as the Saipan community itself—a dynamic mix of cultures and traditions.

The people of the Pacific have long been heralded as skilled craftspeople, canoe builders, and carvers. Early cave art illustrates the islands' close connection to the land, the sea, the animals and their beliefs. And now a new generation of artists are building and creating upon these ancient traditions, mixing the old with the new, signaling a cultural renaissance in the CNMI.

Here is a sampling of these new cultural torchbearers.

LINDSAY NASH

"It's all about stories for me," Leon said. "What drives me to carve is the stories. Whether it's photography, writing or carving—it's the story behind what I envision that enforces the shape."

Leonard Leon: Carver and storyteller

Leonard Leon, better known as Leni, has become one of the foremost shell carvers on Saipan. Originally from the Marshall Islands, Leon comes from a long line of traditional boat builders and carvers.

"I began carving the moment my lineage was born—hundreds of thousands of years ago," he explained in his Susupe home, a cozy residence that feels like an extension of his art. Upcycled, homemade shelves. Mason jars of organized shell collections. A dusty carving workshop on his balcony next to the jungle.

LINDSAY NASH

Leonard Leon, better known as Leni, has become one of the foremost shell carvers on Saipan. Originally from the Marshall Islands, Leon comes from a long line of traditional boat builders and carvers.

Leon has always been an artist—first sketching basic illustrations as a child and later studying graphic design in college in Hawaii. He is a photographer and filmmaker, and has won an award for a screenplay he wrote about his childhood experience of being thrown into shark-filled waters by his father, a *Rikūil-lonñin-Pako*, a Marshallese person who has the gift to prevent shark bites through chants and other protected knowledge. Leon, who was exposed to carving in his young life by his father, who carved traditional canoes from breadfruit trees, explains that his shell carvings are often "storyboards"—a piece of art that depicts a story.

"It's all about stories for me," Leon said. "What drives me to carve is the stories. Whether it's photography, writing or carving, it's the story behind what I envision that enforces the shape."

For example, on Mother's Day this year, Leon carved a beautiful adze necklace from a giant clam shell. "It's an interpretation of my mother," Leon said. "There are 12 holes—six on each side, representing her 12 biological children. It's the shape of an adze, an ancient tool that was used to shape ancient canoes, homes. My belief is my mother shaped each of us into who we are. She was the master carver of my family. There are also six spearheads running down the center, representing her eight daughters who will be the spearheads of their own families. And turn it over and you see the weaving on the back. My mother was the one who kept us together all these years."

Leon has been carving for only a year but he has already created more than 300 pieces in that time. To see his work, visit him online via Instagram at @inspiremicronesia.

"Back in the old days, the Chamorro people would just use what we have—from the ocean to the land—so I'm going back to that, picking what I have around my neighborhood and around the island," Pangelinan said. "I feel it connects me to the land and to the culture."

Ashley Reiko Pangelinan: Creator of floral crowns

Ashley Reiko Pangelinan is the artist and owner of Pualani Crown, where she creates floral arrangements for weddings, events, and workshops to teach others.

Ashley Reiko Pangelinan has been playing with flowers since she was a small child on Saipan.

Picking Santa Ana "sugar flowers" to suck the sweet nectar, playing "wedding" with her cousins, and helping her grandmother in her garden—flowers have always been a part of her life.

And when a friend invited her to a flower crown workshop in Hawaii, Pangelinan immediately fell in love with the craft. She was completely hooked.

She took the art back to Tokyo, where she was living at the time and started a business. She started creating flower crowns for birthdays and other celebrations.

"I practiced, practiced, practiced," she said as she carefully placed another strand of song of India greenery into a crown.

Born and raised on Saipan, Pangelinan is the owner of Pualani Crown, a flower arranging business that offers classes and workshops.

"I always loved flowers because of my grandmother," Pangelinan said.

Her grandmother, now deceased, was a Chamorro woman who gardened and created flower arrangements, and has long been Pangelinan's inspiration.

"The flowers connect me to my grandmother," she said.

Using bird of paradise, Hawaiian red ginger, bougainvillea, plumeria, Santa Ana, and song of India, among others, Pangelinan wrapped the wire crown with blossoms as she spoke about her art.

Pangelinan, who you might recognize from the popular WE670 YouTube duo with Mark Sonoda that shares stories from Saipan, said her flower arranging connects her to her island roots. "Back in the old days, the Chamorro people would just use what we have—from the ocean to the land—so I'm going back to that, picking what I have around in my neighborhood and around the island. I feel it connects me to the land and to the culture."

The crowns build on the Refaluwasch tradition of *mwar* crowns, one of the many Carolinian traditions that seeped into the island culture on Saipan. "My technique has evolved," Pangelinan said. "It is connected to the way Carolinians created crowns, which is wrapping flowers and leaves together. Now, I'm always finding new things, new materials around the island."

Pangelinan currently offers private flower crown and arrangement classes for groups of three to six people to remain compliant with social distancing measures. See her work or book a workshop on Facebook or Instagram at @pualanicrown.

Momoko Halstead is the artist, designer, and owner of SPN.dylus670 (pronounced Saipan-dylus 670), which offers a modern take on ancient Chamorro jewelry.

Momoko Halstead: Modern Chamorro jewelry maker

Momoko Halstead started creating necklaces from spondylus shells because it was simply the type of jewelry she wanted for herself.

A teacher's aide at Kagman High School, Halstead has always loved art. She was a Polynesian dancer at Fiesta Resort & Spa Saipan for 15 years. And along with dancing, she also loved to sing and draw.

Now she is the artist, designer, and owner of SPN.dylus670 (pronounced Saipan-dylus 670), which offers a modern take on ancient Chamorro jewelry.

"I never planned to have a business," she said, laughing, as she sat at a table covered with a smattering of shells and wiring, her Dremel rotary tool hanging above her.

"It just happened," she said. "I didn't think it would be this popular. I didn't think I would be making 300-plus necklaces in my first year."

Halstead mostly uses spondylus shells for her art. These orange-red shells became prevalent during the Latte Period (about AD 800 to AD 1700) in Chamorro history and were used for shell ornamentation, currency and trade, body coverings, and jewelry.

"In my own jewelry, I'm using the spondylus with metals, and using a Dremel—modernized technology," Halstead said. "I'm putting the past and present together."

One of her most popular pieces is the aptly named "Heart of the CNMI," which features a coin-shaped spondylus with wiring on a gold chain. She also creates customized pieces for her customers.

She has created the art so others can "take a piece of home wherever they may go."

"I feel like this art connects me to Saipan," she said. "Because of the shells. Finding them here. The art feels like home."

A mother of three, Halstead is completely self-taught in jewelry making, wiring, and shell carving. She learned everything from YouTube, she said. "That's the thing I learned, and what I would tell others," she said of creating her own business. "Don't be afraid to do anything, start anything. If you feel like it's not for you, then move on to the next thing."

She has now been running her business for one year, and she's excited to see where it takes her. "I really enjoy people looking at their new piece and cherishing it and sharing it with each other," she said. "It's what makes me keep going. It is seeing that people are happy with what they get."

SPN.dylus670 art and jewelry pieces can be found at The Shack, Marianas Creations, and online at Guampedia and on Instagram @SPN.dylus670.

"I feel like this art connects me to Saipan," Halstead said. "Because of the shells. Finding them here. The art feels like home."

Yes, girls can skate!

BEA CABRERA

Valerie Estella idolizes Sky Brown, the youngest professional skateboarder and surfer. "She inspires me to learn to new tricks, she is also 12 and just over all a positive person. I'd like to compete someday like her."

BEA CABRERA

Geanna Chargalauf says skateboarding is fun.

BEA CABRERA

"Skateboading keeps me away from gadgets," said Daryl Atalig.

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Quick. Name a famous skateboarding champion.

That is almost too easy and you can't be faulted if you answered Tony Hawk. The man has legendary status in the world of skateboarding. That also pretty much sums up the male-dominated aspect of this fast-growing sports. When you talk about skateboarding, it's usually the boys and men that come to mind.

But no more. Since women started doing the same things in the '90s, the world of skateboarding is also now peppered with names like Leticia Bufoni of Sao Paolo, Brazil and Philippine-based Margielyn "Margie" Didal, whose feats and triumphs are inspiring a lot of young girls today.

Valerie Estella of Mount Carmel School and Darlyn Marie Atalig of Tanapag Middle School, who are both 12, and 11-year-old Geana Chargualaf of Garapan Elementary School are the freshest faces of female skateboarders in the CNMI. Maybe you see them practicing tricks in the park or riding their skateboards around Garapan after school at dusk, effectively demolishing gender stereotypes of the sport.

"Many say skateboarding is a boy's sport but, if girls can do it, it's not exclusive to just boys; it is a sport. The skating community is not gatekeeping, limiting, or mean. They actually encourage each other to try out anything," Estella said. "When boys see me riding, they don't tease me at all and they think it's really cool. Some boys don't ride the skateboard. One time, a boy came up to me and told me he started skateboarding because he saw girls do it and I was like, that's really cool!"

Atalig said her dad and other women in sports encouraged her to be active. "I am into various activities: basketball, *awa-odori*, and skateboarding. Riding keeps me happy. It is so much fun and keeps me from being stuck with gadgets. …It's good to be outside. We live on a beautiful island where you can be with nature, with friends. Saipan offers big and safe areas where we can ride," she said.

Chargualaf considers herself a newbie in the sport. "I saw my auntie do it and I thought it was fun and I started riding. I don't know doing some tricks yet but I am practicing. …Valerie, Daryl, and I usually ride for two hours after school and this helps me practice my balance to improve my ride."

People who see them ride around find it new and refreshing. " I can say that Saipan is a 'skate friendly' place and the support of the community is great. When we ride around, people would wave at us. Sometimes they say 'hi' and give a compliment about how nice my skateboard is. We just say 'hi' back, thank them, and ride on," Estella said. "This is the skate culture that I like. Everybody is just friendly and what makes it unique is when you get started with skateboarding, it's never the same or boring. I love the experience when we ride around."

Although quite young, these girls know how important getting into sports will affect their lives, how it nurtures their passion in skateboarding, and the bond they build. "I ride with Val and Geanna all the time. … We are like sisters. We stick together and encourage each other. …We also see other girls like us skateboarding and it's nice to see more and more girls are into it," Atalig said.

"Skateboarding is for all ages. Riding is always fun and it gives you a chance to meet different people," Chargualaf said.

For Estella, skateboarding is not just a sport but a source of life lessons. "If you like something you should do it. If it's hard but you really love it that much, you just keep on trying until you get it. Skateboarding teaches me not to give up," she said. "Some friends don't want to join because they're not into it, which is fine and accepting it is sportsmanship. …One of my friends started recently and she is starting with a small board until she gets a bigger one. …There are many girls out there who want to skate and when they see us, I hope they get encouraged that it's okay to skate."

Massage in the time of COVID-19

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TAGA *Plus* Associate Editor

Lohas Massage

- Established: **2014**
- Claim to fame: **LED mask treatment**
- Type of massages: **Hot stone massage, coconut oil massage, and acupressure massage.**
- Cost: **$20/hour, $30/1 hour and 30 minutes**
- Location: **2nd floor of the Winchell's Donut building in Susupe**
- Operating hours: **11am to 10pm everyday**
- Telephone number: **235-8000 or 483-4807**

While most of the world is on lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic, residents of the CNMI continue to enjoy a somewhat pre-coronavirus existence ever since the Governor's COVID-19 Task Force eased restrictions in the middle of the year due to a sustained absence of community transmission.

One of the perks of having no local transmissions is that restaurants, stores, and even poker arcades are open, face-to-face learning in schools is rising, and even residents have access to one of humanity's guilty pleasures—massages.

According to the Better Health Channel, one of the immediate benefits of massages is a feeling of deep relaxation and calm. This happens because massages prompt the release of endorphins—the brain chemicals called neurotransmitters—that produce feelings of wellbeing.

It also said that levels of stress hormones, such as adrenalin, cortisol, and norepinephrine, are also reduced when you treat yourself to massages. Studies have also shown that high levels of stress hormones impair the immune system. Some of the physical benefits of massage and myotherapy include:

- Reduces muscle tension
- Improves circulation
- Stimulation of the lymphatic system
- Reduction of stress hormones
- Relaxation
- Increases joint mobility and flexibility
- Improves skin tone
- Improves recovery of soft tissue injuries
- Heightens mental alertness
- Reduces anxiety and depression.

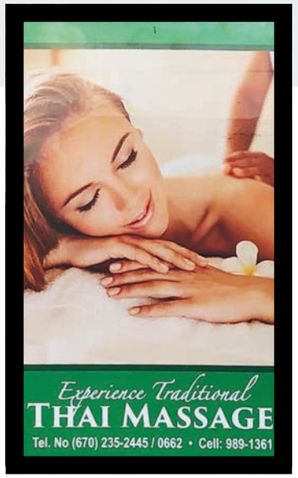
Stress and physical and mental fatigue are tested more than ever as the CNMI enters its 11th month of dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, which makes massages more of a need and not just a luxury.

The good thing with massage establishments in the CNMI is that, even before the novel coronavirus reared its crowned head, they were already practicing good hygiene like changing the pillow covers and bedsheets after every customer and making sure all rooms are sanitized. Even before reopening in the middle of the year, local massage parlors also made sure they adhere fully to the guidelines of the Governor's COVID-19 Task Force.

And for an industry whose prerequisite is human contact, it's amazing that the local massage industry has survived in this time of COVID-19. In this quarter's TAGA *Plus* edition, we give a brief rundown of four massage establishments on Saipan.

Hanamitsu Hotel Spa

- Established: **2010**
- Claim to fame: **Only Bali-style massage parlor in the CNMI.**
- Type of massages: **Back pain relief sports massage, aromatherapy message, Thai massage, and hot stone massage.**
- Cost: **$25/hour**
- Location: **Paseo de Marianas**
- Operating hours: **10am to 10pm**
- Telephone number: **788-6658**



Traditional Thai Massage

- Established: **2009**
- Claim to fame: **Thai masseuses with decades of experience**
- Type of massages: **Traditional Thai massage**
- Cost: **$25/hour**
- Location: **Shakir Building in Chalan Kanoa**
- Operating hours: **2pm to 9pm everyday**
- Telephone number: **235-2445 or 989-1361**

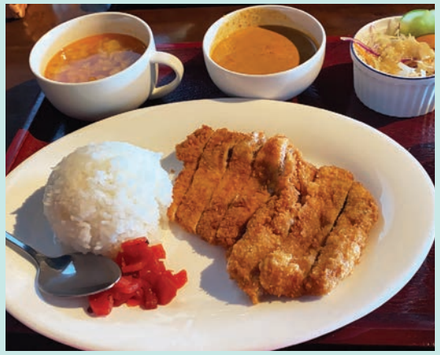
Sunshine Massage

- Established: **2020**
- Claim to fame: **Late-night (up to 1am) massages**
- Type of massages: **Tailored massages**
- Cost: **$25/hour**
- Location: **Across GIG Discotheque in Garapan**
- Operating hours: **11am to 1am everyday**
- Telephone number: **287-9161**

This creamy carbonara can be found at Judy's Cafe for only $12! I've tried many carbonaras on the island but I always find myself traveling to the other side of the island to get my carbonara fix and, not to mention, for a cheaper price than most restaurants.

Another favorite from Judy's Café is the lechon kawali, or fried pork belly. It's served with a generous scoop of rice, a salad with Caesar dressing, finadenne (soy sauce with green onions and hot pepper), and a side of gravy. This also goes for $12!

Known for its curry and very low lunch prices, Salty's is the place to be when you're unsure of what you want. They have a variety of curries such as pork cutlet curry, shrimp curry, chicken curry, beef curry, or just curry. One thing I love about this is that they serve the curry on the side to make sure that you can put how much curry you want on your plate, without it being overwhelming!



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The Hut in Garapan offers these California fries, or carne asada fries, which are loaded with meat, onions, tomatoes, and some secret sauce all over a blanket of crispy fries. If you don't feel like eating a burrito or taco but want a full meal, this is your best option at The Hut!

Boba ice cream. Do I need to say more? Boba lovers can now enjoy this ice cream bar that's filled with boba, or tapioca pearls bits, with each bite. The ice cream is usually made of dairy products, such as milk and cream, and can be flavored with other ingredients such as green tea, Thai tea, etc.

JC's Cafe also has a variety of food if you're not into fried chicken. Like these nachos, JC's Cafe has a menu for Mexican food lovers! Side note: I'm the type of person who prefers to pour the nacho cheese myself instead of it being already poured on. That way the cheese doesn't overpower all the other condiments on this nacho platter. So thank you, JC's Café, for separating the cheese!

This Peskadot (fisherman) Salad is JC's Cafe's take on a fish salad. It has fresh green lettuce, crinkle carrots, radish, red onions, bell peppers, crinkled cucumbers, mahi-mahi, and topped with furikake (a Japanese seasoning typically made with toasted sesame seeds, nori, salt, and sugar).

These two pictures showcase two aesthetic backgrounds that can be taken at Sunnyside Cafe in Garapan! Again, they are perfect for Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, or Twitter flex. Flex: a Gen-Z term that means to show off.

They're not only known for their amazing food but also for their ambiance, where you can take cute pictures to post on Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, and whatever other social media platform you use. Judy's Cafe has several aesthetic props such as telephones from the 1900s, clocks, vases, statues, and more.

For sushi lovers, you can get this sushi platter at Garapan Restaurant. The best part is you don't have to call a day in advance! This assorted sushi platter is perfect for salmon lovers. It has a roll of baked salmon roll, four pieces of salmon tobiko (fish eggs), Philadelphia roll, and crunchy spicy salmon roll. For those who are lactose intolerant, be sure to ask to remove the cream cheese from every roll.

From left, Lee Tenorio, Commonwealth Healthcare Corp. public information officer; Esther Muña, CHCC chief executive officer; Warren Villagomez, the Governor's COVID-19 Task Force chairman; and Patrick Guerrero, the governor's authorized representative. All are key to why the CNMI is one of the safest places to be. 2021, we are ready for you!

On Tinian, you can catch this scene going to the airport. Fun fact: The people on Tinian are super nice and friendly. As I arrived on Tinian, driving around I would pass by people driving, and they would wave at me. I think this is Tinian's way of not only saying hi, but for respect on the road, or just simply welcoming you to the island.

Saipan's sister island, Tinian, is a great way of escape, not only for tourists but for residents as well. This sign is in front of the famous JC Cafe, known for its fried chicken, in San Jose.

There are many sites on Tinian that you must visit before you leave, like the Tinian sign near Taga Beach. The sign portrays a sunset on a beach and a signature tourist pose—jumping in the air as one takes your photo. You don't have to worry about being alone when you take your photo here. The artist drew eight people who look like they're jumping in the air with you!

Another change of scenery the island has to offer! On off days, my close friend, my boyfriend, and I would gear up for a nice hike and get lost in the jungle to find beautiful views of the island.

Being in quarantine, or just in my house, I often find myself escaping my comfort place and going under the shade with my hydro flask filled with cold water, my fully charged laptop, and my phone to use my hotspot. Defeats the purpose of being outside, but it offers a change of scenery and I get inspired to write my articles quickly before my deadline!

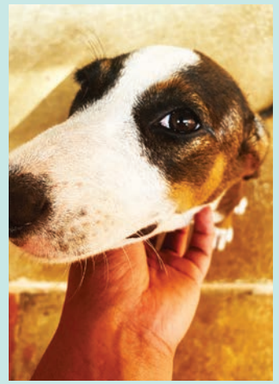
Speaking of things to be grateful for, I'm grateful for my dear friend who got me this stunning pink and yellow hibiscus, with black and green beads, neckpiece. In Carolinian, it's called a lighatúttúr, which is a beaded neckpiece.

Calathea zebrina, commonly known as zebra plant, is noted for its striking ornamental leaves that feature zebra-like stripes as suggested by both the specific epithet and the common name. Not only known as a zebra plant, it is also known to give out some much-needed serotonin for plant lovers! As a beginner plant collector, the amount of happiness that overcame me just by looking at this aesthetically bright plant was unreal.

The Commonwealth Office of Transit Authority has been transporting arriving passengers from the Francisco C. Ada/Saipan International Airport to the government quarantine facilities after they have done their testing upon arrival.

I always wondered why people went jogging in the early morning and, as I was going home at 5 in the morning after the CNMI's general election last Nov., I found the answer. You get to jog and enjoy the breathtaking sunrise. Something to consider as a New Year's resolution: jogging at dawn.

Meet Samwool and Maga'lahi, both meaning "chief" or "warrior." These two "warriors" fought to make sure that the CNMI's election last Nov. 3. 2020, was honest, credible, and results came out early.



One of the many blessings that I received this year was this little girl my dad named Sadie. Sadie and her best friend, whom my dad named Chica, showed up on my porch on Sunday morning. With everything bad going on in the world, I look forward to seeing her. There are still many things to be grateful for.

The tale of the **clueless housewife** and a **clogged toilet**

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Fair warning: Before going any further into this article, you are being warned ahead of time that this is not going to be pretty, nor is this story for the faint of heart or the squeamish. So prudes and people with fixed ideas on what should be printed in magazines, this is your time to turn the page. You have been warned.

Now that we've got that out of the way, let's me tell you that one time when I went on YouTube to find out how to unclog a blocked toilet.

Yes, YouTube.

If YouTube earned a dollar for every tutorial I watched, they'd probably earn thousands from me alone because let me tell you, I YouTubed everything. I was that clueless.

I tied the knot with my now husband about four months ago, many might say earlier than most. Don't get me wrong, no one can dictate when you should get married, but in your early 20s, you're usually still figuring things out, or at least I am.

Case in point: "Darn, when do you put in the fabric softener again? Maybe you put in the softener with the detergent so the clothes smell extra good, makes sense, right? Makes sense to me," I tell myself as I tackled one of my many new house chores as a clueless housewife.

I kid you not, I could barely take care of myself entering married life. I lived with my parents my entire life and, being the *unica hija* or "only girl," I was spoiled as could be. The only thing my dad didn't do for me was probably bathe me. Everything else however, my mom and dad did.

I never realized exactly how spoiled or clueless I was in terms of keeping a home in order until I officially moved in with my husband.

But do I have some good news for my sisters and brothers on the same boat, from cooking meals to cleaning the bathroom shower, down to stitching up holes on my husband's pants, YouTube was my saving grace through it all. I can never forget how many tutorials I watched on how to unclog a toilet when I encountered my first toilet clog.

This was in the heat of the pandemic; my husband was at work while I worked from home. I had just finished using the toilet and I noticed the contents of the toilet were not going down as I hoped.

I thought, "This is an easy fix, I've seen my dad pour a bucket of water into a toilet once. That should do the trick." Dude, was I gravely mistaken.

The bucket of water just seemed to anger the already full toilet bowl and it started to throw up what I had discharged into it, and more!

I remember that the fear and panic I felt were indescribable. What made this situation even worse was that we lived in a little studio room so the contents of the toilet bowl didn't just overflow into the floor but into the room as well. There was literal crap everywhere and I just broke down.

I turned to YouTube for the fix, but this was the one time YouTube didn't have the answer. It probably did, but it gave me so many options. The tutorial I went with was turning the knob behind the toilet that triggered the water. I think it was supposed to stop the toilet from producing water but 'til this day I'm not really sure.

When I thought it couldn't get any worse, it did. I broke the knob and now the hose that connected to the toilet also started spewing water. Our room was starting to fill up with water and toilet contents even faster. I started grabbing perfectly good towels, clothes, anything I could possibly get my hands on, and attempted to soak up all the water.

As I was working, I didn't realize my husband had returned for his lunch break. When I looked around and saw him, the confusion on his face pushed me to the edge and I just started crying ugly tears.

Fortunately, my husband didn't get upset. He, instead, proceeded to fix the toilet and within minutes, he was able to stop the water and get the toilet to flush. That was the day I developed a fetish for handymen.

I have had a lot of mishaps in the span of my relatively new marriage, some not so bad, some worse than others, but I continue to learn every day. The upside of it all is now I have someone who is legally bound to endure every step of my journey as a clueless housewife.

A year-by-year look at the journey to AFC

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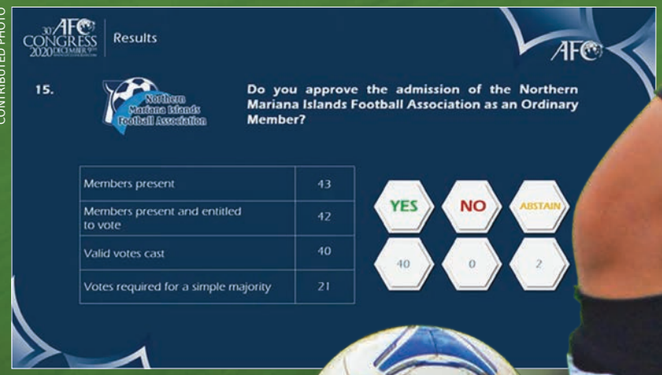
CONTRIBUTED PHOTO


AFC CONGRESS 2020
Results
AFC
15.
Northern Mariana Islands Football Association
Do you approve the admission of the Northern Mariana Islands Football Association as an Ordinary Member?
Members present 43
Members present and entitled to vote 42
Valid votes cast 40
Votes required for a simple majority 21
YES 40
NO 0
ABSTAIN 2

The Asian Football Confederation votes to approve the inclusion of the Northern Mariana Islands Football Association in the federation as an ordinary member.

It began in 2005 when the Commonwealth Youth Soccer Organization was dissolved and Northern Mariana Islands Football Association stepped up to provide a program for children between the ages of 4-and-half and 16.

NMIFA was chartered as a non-profit group in August 2005 and in the same month, it opened the registration for the fall season. By September, 250 kids signed up, more than doubling the turnout from the 2004 season of the then defunct CYSO—a sign that the sport in the NMI has a lot of promise.

With the unexpectedly large turnout, NMIFA needed volunteer coaches. More than 20 parents showed up and attended the coaches' introductory clinic in September and conducted by Guam Football Association officials, including now GFA president Tino San Gil.

The following month, the "NMIFA Draft" took place after players were evaluated through drills and coaches selected the members of their respective teams.

By November 2015, NMIFA kicked off its inaugural season with over 300 participants listed to play in the matches at the American Memorial Park grounds. Paire Football Club, MP United Football Club, Matansa Football Club, and Independents Football Club were the founding members/teams of NMIFA.

Fast-forward to 2020, NMIFA was granted full membership to the esteemed Asian Football Confederation.

The big leap came after NMIFA took one small step after another, stumbling along the way, but stood up as always to continue the journey. Every year since 2005, NMIFA worked to develop the sport in the Commonwealth and the people involved in the program, paving the way for its inclusion in the prestigious AFC family.

2006

From a program that just catered to youth players, NMIFA managed to add a women's competition to its calendar less than a year after its establishment. That same year, the NMI, as a guest team, played in its first international game—the East Asian Football Federation U-14 Youth Festival in China. Before the year ended, NMIFA created two more milestones: it started a men's league and was granted provisional membership to EAFF.

2007

The islands' residents personally witnessed the first international match featuring a CNMI national team and Guam with the staging of the inaugural Marianas Cup that also served as a 2008 East Asian Football Championship Preliminary Round. The squad that was made up of players lured from other sports and had members as young as 14 years old and as old as 48 gave the highly favored Guam crew quite a scare after forcing a standoff, 2-2, before the visiting team pulled off a 3-2 victory.

2008

That was the year when NMIFA was granted full membership to EAFF. In the same year, NMIFA widened its reach, starting a program in the interscholastic level with 17 teams competing in the elementary division games. Referees and coaches' courses were also regularly held to raise the technical aspect of the game in the CNMI.

2009

NMIFA knocked on AFC's door and was let in as an associate member. Then, for the first time, the NMI's men's and women's national team played in an EAFF event. The Commonwealth's female players saw action in the East Asian Football Federation Women's Football Championship 2010 Semifinals Competition in Chinese-Taipei, while the men's squad played in East Asian Football Championship 2010 Preliminary Competition in Guam.

2010

The NMI men's national team met Guam for the nth time and, after losing the Marianas Cup for three straight years, the host forced the visiting squad to a tie, 1-1. The islands' youth players continued to gain exposure in international tournaments with the CNMI boys U15 team entered in the EAFF U15 Football Festival in Guam

2011

The first entry to the Commonwealth's national team record book belonged to the CNMI Boys U15 National Team. The Kiyoshi Sekiguchi-coached squad nipped Macau, 2-1, in the EAFF U15 Youth Tournament in Chinese-Taipei for the first historic victory of the NMI in an international competition. The team was the very same crew that suffered a 0-23 beating from North Korea during the 2010 edition of the EAFF event in Guam.

2012

M-League was born, giving the NMI's premier competition for adults more identity. On the youth side, the NMI's young guns played in multiple AFC events—AFC U13 Girls Football Tournament, AFC U16 Championships 2013, AFC U14 Boys Festival of Football, and AFC U16 Championship 2014. The NMI's stints in AFC events were made possible by the steady growth of its youth league.

2013

The islands' players continued to hone their skills for international competitions and their efforts and dedication were rewarded when the NMI Boys U14 National Team won a game in the AFC U14 Championship 2014 Qualifiers in Beijing, China. It was the Commonwealth's very first win in an AFC event and what made the victory sweeter was it came from rival Guam. The NMI had another first in 2014 when its men's national team debuted in an AFC competition—the 2014 Challenge Cup Qualifiers in Nepal.

2014

The NMI Men's National Team was badly beaten in Nepal in 2013, surrendering 19 goals to Palestine, Bangladesh, and the hosts. Disappointed but not discouraged, the Blue Ayuyus came back stronger the next year and made history for the CNMI when they defeated Macau, 2-1, in the 2015 EAFF East Asian Cup Preliminary Round 1 in Guam. It was the men's team's first international victory, while the women's squad played in the same competition and made it a double celebration for the NMI following a 7-0 demolition of Macau.

2015

Super Typhoon Soudelor struck the islands in August at a time when NMI players were in the crucial stages of their preparations for three international tournaments. Despite the challenges brought by the aftermath of the disaster, NMI players stayed strong and soldiered on to compete in the AFC U14 Regional Festival of Football in China, AFC U16 Championship 2016 Qualifiers in Laos, and the AFC U19 Championship Bahrain 2016 Qualifiers in Thailand. At the local scene, NMIFA managed to hold its regular leagues for youth, women's, and men's despite the delays and damage that Soudelor caused to the islands.

2016

After playing in makeshift pitches at the AMP Park, sharing school fields, and enduring potholes-covered and the sometimes, muddy CPA Airport Field, the NMIFA stepped closer to its dream of having its own facility as the NMI Soccer Training Center broke ground in the last quarter of the year.

2017

Construction of the NMI Soccer Training Center began and the islands' players and officials continued to gain international exposure by seeing action in several EAFF and AFC-sanctioned events and undergoing training camps. Locally, the NMIFA saw balance and a very competitive field in its leagues, as championships were spread out to different clubs.

2018

The NMI Soccer Training Center opened its doors to the community, providing the islands two pitches, offices, bleachers, restrooms, equipment rooms, floodlights, and ample parking spaces. The new state-of-the-art facility hosted the Marianas Cup and, inspired by the home crowd, the NMI Women's U19 Team topped Guam, 3-2. NMIFA also started holding its leagues at the NMISTC, but a little over a month into the fall season, Super Typhoon Yutu struck and wrecked the facility along with hundreds of homes and buildings in the CNMI. The NMIFA, its players, and several volunteers spent the remainder of the season clearing the damaged facility and helping the community recover from Yutu.

2019

With the help of its various supporters, the NMIFA managed to fix the NMISTC and games resumed in the spring season. Having its facility back, NMI players were able to train and compete in both AFC and EAFF-organized events. The Commonwealth also went to Guam for the Marianas Cup where the NMI Women's National Team stunned the host, 3-0.

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

The NMI Soccer Training Center in Koblerville.

On to the next

The NMIFA was less than a week done with the Asian Football Confederation 2020 Women's Football Day that drew nearly 200 female players when the government started implementing safety protocols against the COVID-19 pandemic in mid-March.

The restrictions forced NMIFA to suspend its competitions and other soccer-related activities. As of this writing (Dec. 23), no actual football competitions have taken place in the CNMI and only national team training pool players were allowed to return to the pitch.

Though the pandemic is not over yet, conditions on island continue to improve and NMIFA's acceptance to the AFC as a full member during these challenging times gives the NMI soccer community something to look forward to in 2021.

One of them is the FIFA membership and, just like in 2005 when NMIFA took on the tough task of steering NMI soccer to greater heights, the road to FIFA will have its shares of ups and down. But with the community behind its journey, NMIFA is confident of reaching this milestone.

RUEL NAVA

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Players make the highlights and are always in the back page of newspapers and cover of sports magazines, but without referees, umpires, and table officials, the specter of playing organized sports won't be possible.

Ruel Nava is the part of the latter. This hardware store supervisor was a familiar fixture behind the scenes in local basketball leagues as a table official for the now defunct Basketball Association of the Northern Mariana Islands.

Nava, 60, said he first got involved in manning the table of basketball games in the third season of the United Filipino Basketball league back in 2003. From then on, he has served as a table official—along with longtime partners Andrew Mesina and Archie Rosario—in a plethora of leagues: the inter-government, inter-commercial, inter-organization, Rotary Club, and many more.

"I wanted to become a table official because you get to know a lot of people in sports and I also wanted to be involved in basketball somehow, having played the sport in my younger years," he said to TAGA *Plus*.

An important trait of being a table official is punctuality, according to Nava. "You always have to be early and I mean not even on time, as you have to be there at the venue before they start playing. You need to check the equipment for scoring and the clock—game clock and shot clock. You need to make sure everything is working fine so you won't encounter any problems during the game."

Table officials also need to brief coaches, players, and referees about new table rules, if any, and must have good rapport with referees so you won't have any miscommunications during the game.

The hardest part of being a table official, he said, is when a team or teams don't have proper uniforms. "Sometimes players don't even suit up with the same uniform; they don't even have numbers. You literally can't score a game or assign a foul or other statistics if players don't have numbers. You're lucky if you know the player, but it's usually more the exception than the rule," he said.

Nava credits Gabriel White and Abner Venus for contributing a lot to his growth as a table official.

"Referee association president Gabriel White also encouraged me to enroll in a seminar and take an exam for certification for table officiating under FIBA Oceania. Unfortunately, I passed on the cer-

➥

From day laborer to store supervisor

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Ruel Nava first came to Saipan on Sept. 11, 1988. He was just 28 years old then. Now 60 years old, that 32-year journey speaks not just of Nava's forays in the local basketball scene but is also a testament to grit.

Nava's story is not only a sports story as this basketball table official also has a fruitful career in the private sector in the Commonwealth.

He truly rose from the ranks, starting as a day laborer more than 32 years ago and, through sheer determination and hard work, is now the store supervisor of the main branch of Joeten Ace Hardware in Gualo Rai.

"My first work was as a laborer under construction company, United Engineering, in San Jose. My salary then was just $1.50/hour." Those simple words do not nearly enough convey the days spent under the searing sun and drizzling rain while working in construction. As Nava simply explains it, he had a family to support.

Thankfully enough, because of his hard work, he was soon promoted to expediter. "Work wasn't as physically hard after that."

Six years after arriving on Saipan, Nava started work at his current employer, Joeten Group of Companies, when was accepted at Joeten Ace Hardware as a salesman. "Through the years I've been assigned to all five of our branches: Susupe, Gualo Rai, San Vicente, and even Tinian and Rota. After a few years I was promoted to supervisor of the main branch in Gualo Rai."

Nava believes that, like everything in life, if you do your best in everything you do, success is not far behind. "Just do

➥

tification because White already left island to go to the U.S. Navy. I also served as a mentor for upcoming table officials under former BANMI official Abner Venus."

Nava has not one but two most memorable games where he served as table official. One was the women's gold medal game between the CNMI and Guam in the 2006 Micronesian Games on Saipan. That was his first time to serve as a table official in a FIBA Oceania-sanctioned game.

No. 2 was the inter-hotel game between Hyatt Regency Saipan and Aqua Resort Club in 2008, but for an entirely different reason. "Hyatt built a big lead early on, but Aqua came back when Rick Alegre entered the game as he was late because of work. I saw him glance at the scoreboard when he first entered the gym and could only wince in disbelief because of the score. But I saw determination in his eyes as he rallied his team and the game became close. He really gave his all in that game."

That was also the game when Alegre collapsed and later died. Nava believes Alegre, who was a well-known figure in the CNMI basketball scene, succumbed while playing the sport he loved.

Aside from Alegre, Nava said the best players he ever saw in action on Saipan were Jun Estolas, Elmer Esdrelon, Darwin Barbo, and Banjo Basila.

Now mostly retired from his table officiating duties, Nava hung up his pencil, eraser, and calculator due to the added demands of his job and a growing family. "I last served as table official in the UFO league in 2015. I stopped because I became busy with work and due to other priorities."

He also missed basketball badly with the COVID-19 pandemic putting all team sports on hold since March 2020. "It's kind of sad that it's been months since we last have a basketball league because of the COVID-19 pandemic."

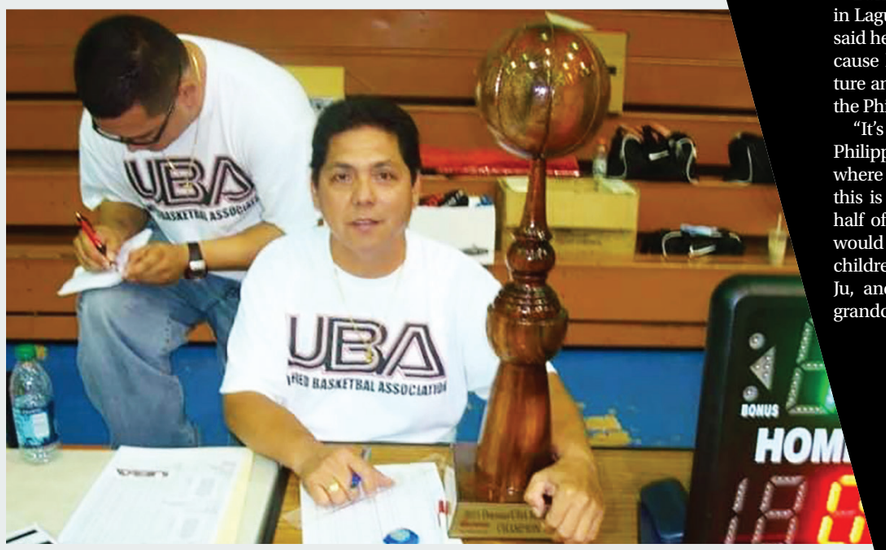
Still, the demands of work and growing family is keeping him focused and he can't wait to just be a simple spectator when basketball resumes play again.

your job to the best of your ability and be loyal to the company you're working for. It's such a great feeling when you get the trust of the company you're working for. That's why you have to really value the trust they give you."

He thanked Joeten and Ace Hardware for employing him the past 27 years and making him part of management. "I also want to thank Priscilla Tenorio Quan for all the trust she gave me."

Born and raised in De La Paz, Biñan in Laguna province, Philippines, Nava said he decided to settle on Saipan because life is simple here and the culture and the climate is very much like the Philippines.

"It's like you never really left the Philippines. At first I didn't even know where Saipan was. Little did I know this is where I would live more than half of my life and this is also where would I meet my wife (Ruby), have children (Russel and his wife, Hyun Ju, and daughter Rushel), and even grandchildren (Ryuna and Ryumi).



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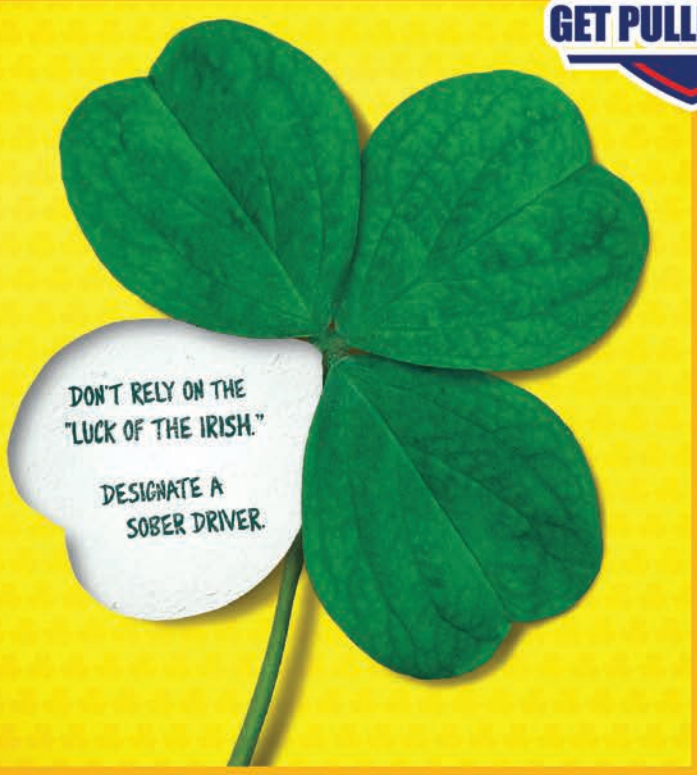

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